

[By Michelle Monroe](#)

Time is running out for the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture's farm and nutrition programs – such as food stamps.

Only days remain before the start of Congress's August recess. If the Farm Bill is not passed by the House before Congressmen return to their homes for their summer break the programs it authorizes will lapse.

Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., is one of 62 representatives trying to persuade the Republican leadership of the House of Representatives to bring this year's Farm Bill to the House floor before the recess.

Meanwhile, farmers are experiencing one of the worst droughts in the nation's history.

Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack has called on the House of Representatives to pass the Farm Bill, citing the damage caused by the drought. Vilsack has been touring the damaged areas, drawing attention to the impact of the drought on both crop and livestock farmers.

Welch is urging Vermont farmers to contact farmers in other parts of the country and have them reach out to their representatives.

The Farm Bill authorizes nearly all of the programs administered by the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture (USDA), including nutrition programs for the poor, crop insurance and environmental programs. The bill was approved by the House Agriculture Committee with bipartisan support and a vote of 35-11 on July 12 and is projected to save the government \$35 billion over 10 years.

The Senate already has passed its version of the bill.

Included in the bill are new dairy programs to replace the Milk Income Loss Contract. The dairy programs include a supply management program and a margin insurance program that will insure farmers against both declines in milk prices and increases in feed prices.

This year farmers are facing both. Milk prices have been dropping throughout the year, exactly as predicted by dairy economists, although the fall has not been as precipitous as it was in 2009 and 2006.

The drought currently hitting the Midwest is increasing feed prices, although some small amounts of rain in the past 24 hours caused prices for corn and soybeans to fall three percent this morning. Even with the rain, Reuters was reporting that corn yields are likely to be at their lowest levels in 10 years.

Welch and Rep. Kristi Noem, R-S.D. drafted a letter signed by 38 Republicans and 24 Democrats urging the leadership of the House to bring the farm bill to a vote before the August recess begins.

Speaker of the House John Boehner has been reluctant to bring the bill to the floor, said Welch.

"It has so many different titles and topics that there's plenty of room for opposition," said Welch.

One of the areas likely generating opposition amongst some Republicans – the bill's nutrition programs, including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (S.N.A.P.) previously known as food stamps.

The Republican budget proposed by Rep. Paul Ryan included more than \$34 billion in cuts to the popular nutrition program. The Farm Bill, as passed by the House Agriculture Committee, includes \$16 billion in cuts.

Welch said he intends to try and restore S.N.A.P. funding when the bill comes to a vote on the House floor.

Nearly 100,000 Vermonters receive assistance through the program, which in 2011 brought more than \$139 million into the state.

Nationally, the average S.N.A.P. benefit is \$134 per person per month or \$4.47 per day for food assistance.

The Farm Bill also includes funding for school lunch programs and Women, Infants and Children (WIC), the program that provides food assistance to pregnant women, infants and pre-school aged children.

"It's appalling that they've been cut," Welch said of the nutrition programs, calling Ryan's proposal to cut \$34 billion from S.N.A.P. "unconscionable."

"We all share the goal of giving small businesses certainty in these challenging economic times," wrote Welch and Noem in their letter to the House leadership. "Agriculture supports nearly 16 million jobs nationwide and over 45 million people are helped each year by the nutrition programs in the farm bill. We have a tremendous opportunity to set the course of farm and nutrition policy for another five years while continuing to maintain and support these jobs nationwide."